## Remarks by Michael S. Owen Ambassador of the United States of America to the Republic of Sierra Leone

## **Bunce Island Exhibit and Presentation**

## Embassy Atrium / Tuesday, November 22, 2011 / 18.00

- Good evening and welcome to the United States Embassy. I am proud to be your host for the opening of a special exhibit on one of the most historically significant sites in Sierra Leone – Bunce Island. This is the first time that this exhibit has been displayed in Freetown, and I want to thank the creators of the exhibit – and in particular the Director of the Bunce Island Coalition, Joseph Opala – for giving us this opportunity.
- In a few moments Professor Opala will deliver a presentation on the Coalition's work and the importance of safeguarding the rich heritage that it represents. But first I want to emphasize the three aspects of Bunce Island that make it particularly important to both of our nations.
- Firstly, on a historical level, Bunce Island is an example of the intertwined destinies of Sierra Leone and the United States. It is both a poignant symbol of the incalculable damage done by the Atlantic slave trade and a sobering reminder of the role that Western nations played in this terrible enterprise.
- The history of Bunce Island is a window into our shared past a past full of pain and greed, but a past that reminds us that humanity has the capacity to change for the better. To recognize the evil of its ways. To learn to forgive, while never forgetting. Bunce Island stands as a reminder that the struggle for justice is far from over. It stands a reminder that we too can confront and overcome the evils of our age.
- **Secondly, Bunce Island has immense social significance.** One of the greatest casualties of any civil war is the loss of shared identity. War destroys not only bodies and minds it also damages the entire social fabric of a nation. Monuments, if they are properly preserved and

explained, can help to heal these wounds. They can help the youth of the current generation to ground themselves – to find stability, and even comfort, in their heritage and what it represents. This is particularly important as Sierra Leone approaches the end of its jubilee year of independence. By acknowledging that the roots of this beautiful nation stretch far back into the past – much further back than 50, or even 500, years – will help all Sierra Leoneans to work together for a brighter future.

- And finally, Bunce Island has incredible economic potential, as a tourist destination. As many of you know, a number of African-Americans have traced their ancestry to Sierra Leone and this has piqued their interest in visiting your country. As Professor Opala will illustrate, the structures and artifacts associated with Bunce Island could be developed into a world-class and highly-educational destination for both international and domestic travelers.
- In previous centuries, Bunce Island was a *gateway* for unwilling captives on their way into slavery. But in our time, this same site could be become a *gateway* for the scattered sons and daughters of Sierra Leone to rediscover their African roots.
- And the United States is committed to assisting with this process. In the
  past year, the U.S. Embassy in Freetown has established an entirely new
  section dedicated to economic and commercial development in Sierra
  Leone. For once the eyes of the world are truly focused on Sierra Leone -once they begin to see past the negative stereotypes and preconceptions –
  the world will discover, as I have, that this country offers many attractive
  destinations to the adventurous and open-minded visitor.
- Thank you.